

Frequently asked Questions about Anorexia Nervosa



It was 6 months ago when I realized my daughter, Jen, had an eating disorder. Jen has always been a picky eater. But I started to see that she moved food around her plate. And she never ate very much. She exercised all the time—even when she was sick. And she was sick a lot. She became very skinny and pale. Her hair was thinning. Jen was moody and seemed sad—I thought that's what teens act like. But once I put the signs together, I talked to Jen about the disease anorexia. She denied the problem. But I knew she needed help. I took her to our health care provider (HCP), and she asked me to put Jen in the hospital. It's been a tough road since then—for all of us. But Jen is back home now. She is still seeing her doctors, and may need help for some time. But she is doing much better.

What is anorexia nervosa?

Anorexia (a-neh-RECK-see ah) nervosa is a type of eating disorder that mainly affects adolescent girls and young women. A person with this disease has an intense fear of gaining weight and limits the food she eats. She

- has a low body weight
- refuses to keep a normal body weight
- is extremely afraid of becoming fat
- believes she is fat even when she's very thin
- misses three (menstrual) periods in a row (for girls/women who have started having their periods)

What causes it?

Anorexia nervosa is more than just a problem with food. It's a way of using food to feel in control of other feelings that may seem overwhelming. Starving is a way for people with anorexia to feel more in control of their lives and to ease tension, anger, and anxiety. While there is no single known cause of anorexia nervosa, several things may contribute to the development of the disorder:

- **Families.** People with a mother or sister with anorexia are more likely to develop the disease. Parents who place too much value on appearance, diet themselves, and criticize their children's bodies are more likely to have a child with anorexia.

- **Culture.** The U.S. has a social and cultural ideal of extreme thinness. Women partially define themselves on how physically attractive they are.
- **Personal characteristics.** Someone with anorexia may feel badly about herself, feel helpless, and hate the way she looks. She has unrealistic expectations of herself and strives for perfection. She feels worthless, despite achievements and perceives a social pressure to be thin.
- **Other emotional disorders.** Other mental health problems, like depression or anxiety, occur along with anorexia.
- **Stressful events or life changes.** Things like starting a new school or job or being teased to traumatic events like rape can lead to the onset anorexia.
- **Biology.** Several biological factors including genetics, neurotransmitter regulation (neurochemicals in the brain), and other related hormones may be important to the onset the disorder.

What are signs of anorexia nervosa?

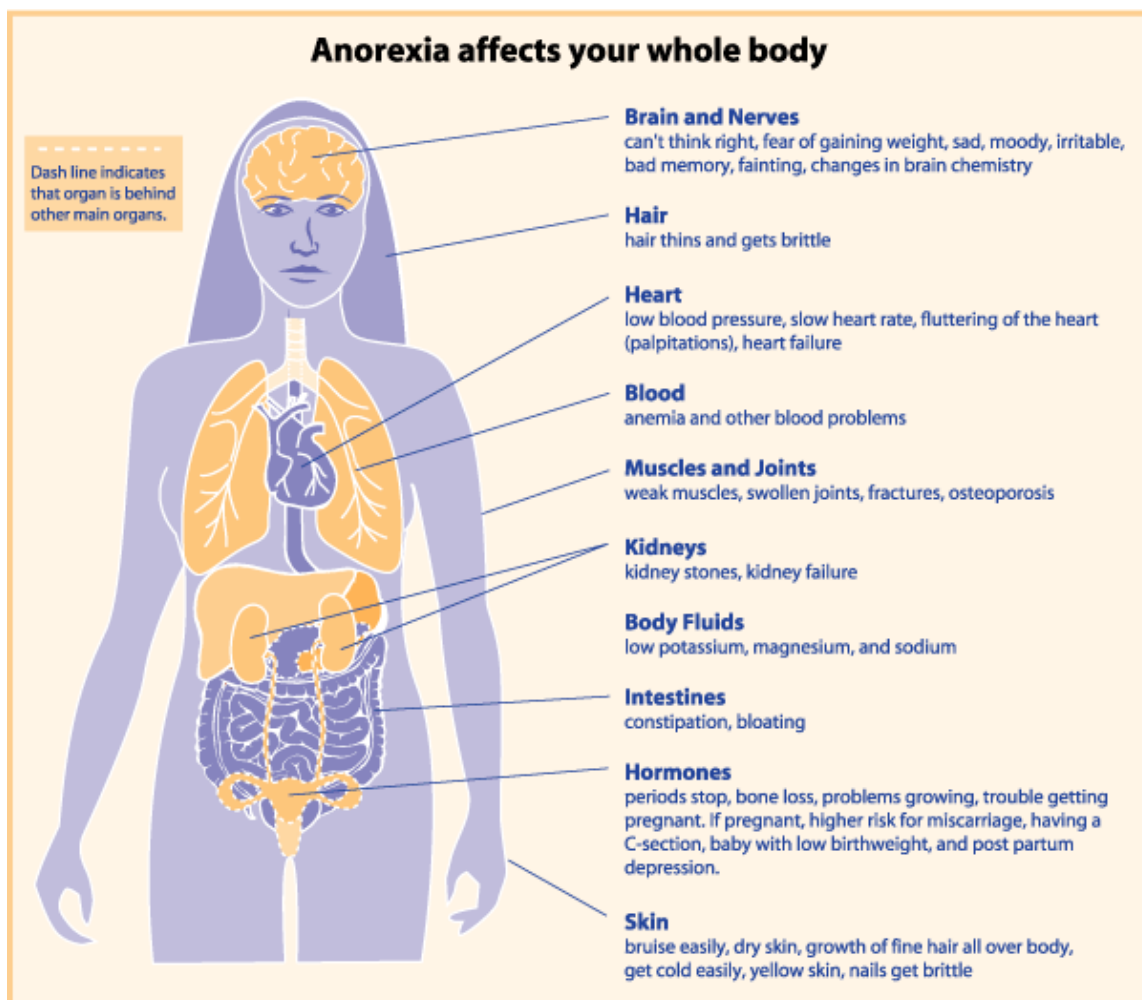
A person with anorexia will have many of these signs:

- loses a lot of weight
- talks about weight and food all the time
- moves food around the plate; doesn't eat it
- weighs food and counts calories
- follows a strict diet
- fears gaining weight
- won't eat in front of others
- ignores/denies hunger
- uses extreme measures to lose weight (self-induced vomiting, laxative abuse, diuretic abuse, diet pills, fasting, excessive exercise)
- thinks she's fat when she's too thin
- gets sick a lot
- weighs self several times a day
- acts moody
- feels depressed

- feels irritable
- doesn't socialize
- wears baggy clothes to hide appearance

What happens to someone who has anorexia nervosa?

The body doesn't get the energy from foods that it needs, so it slows down. Look at the picture to find out how anorexia affects your health.



Can someone with anorexia nervosa get better?

Yes. People with this disease can get better. The treatment depends on what the person needs. The person must get back to a healthy weight. Sometimes, this means going to a hospital and staying there for treatment. Different types of health care providers, like doctors, nutritionists, and therapists, will help the patient get better. These HCPs will help the patient regain the weight, improve physical health and nutrition, learn healthy eating patterns, and cope with thoughts and feelings related to the disorder. After leaving the hospital, the patient continues to get help from her HCPs.

But a hospital stay may not be needed. Another type of treatment program is one in which a person goes to the hospital during the day, but lives at home. Other people with anorexia can recover by getting individual counseling from an HCP, like a therapist who specializes in eating disorders.

Many times, eating disorders happen with other problems, like depression and anxiety problems. These problems are also treated along with the anorexia, and may involve medicines that help reduce feelings of depression and anxiety.

Family counseling and support groups may also be a part of treatment. If the patient is young, family therapy is particularly important. Support groups help patients and families talk about their experiences and help each other get better.

Can women who had anorexia nervosa in the past still get pregnant?

It depends. Women who have fully recovered from anorexia nervosa have a better chance of getting pregnant. While a woman has anorexia nervosa, she does not get her usual period and doesn't normally ovulate. However, she may get pregnant during the weight recovery phase because her reproductive system is getting back to normal. After initial weight recovery, some women may still have irregular periods, which can lead to problems getting pregnant. Women who are continuously missing their periods should see their HCPs.

Can anorexia hurt a baby when the mother is pregnant?

If a woman with anorexia gets pregnant, the baby and mother can be affected. The baby is more likely to be born at a low weight and born prematurely (early). The mother is more likely to have a miscarriage, deliver by C-section, and have post partum depression.

The National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC)

A Project of the Office on Women's Health in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

For more information...

You can find out more about anorexia from the National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) at (800) 994-WOMAN (9662) or from these organizations:

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), NIH, HHS

Phone: (866) 615-NIMH (6464)

Internet Address: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

Weight-control Information Network (WIN), NIDDK, NIH, HHS

Phone: (877) 946-4627

Internet Address: <http://www.niddk.nih.gov/health/nutrit/win.htm>

Academy for Eating Disorders (AED)

Phone: (703) 556-9222

Internet Address: <http://www.aedweb.org>

Harvard Eating Disorders Center (HEDC)

Phone: (617) 236-7766

Internet Address: <http://www.hedc.org>

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD)

Phone: (847) 831-3438

Internet Address: <http://www.anad.org>

National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA)

Phone: (800) 931-2237

Internet Address: <http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org>

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